



March 22, 2011

Nuclear Energy Isn't Needed

By KUMI NAIDOO

Twelve days are not nearly enough to comprehend the magnitude of the catastrophes that hit Japan starting March 11. From the children who lost parents in the crush of the earthquake, to those whose loved ones are still missing after the tsunami, to the scores of workers risking their health by heroically attempting to stabilize the Fukushima nuclear complex — there is no end to the tragic stories.

Yet in addition to the grief and empathy I feel for the Japanese people, I am beginning to develop another emotion, and that is anger. As we anxiously await every bit of news about the developments at Fukushima, hoping that radiation leaks and discharges will be brought to an end, that the risk of further catastrophe will be averted, and that the Japanese people will have one less nightmare to cope with, governments across the world continue to promote further investment in nuclear power. Just last week, for example, the government of my home country of South Africa announced that it was adding 9,600 megawatts of nuclear energy to its new energy plan.

There are two dangerous assumptions currently parading themselves as fact in the midst of the ongoing nuclear crisis. The first is that nuclear energy is safe. The second is that nuclear energy is an essential element of a low carbon future, that it is needed to prevent catastrophic climate change. Both are false.

Nuclear technology will always be vulnerable to human error, natural disaster, design failure or terrorist attack. What we are seeing at Fukushima right now are failures of the systems. The reactors themselves withstood the earthquake and tsunami, but then the vital cooling systems failed. When the back-up power systems also failed, the reactors overheated, eventually causing the spread of radiation. This is only one example of what can go wrong.

Nuclear power is inherently unsafe and the list of possible illnesses stemming from exposure to the accompanying radiation is horrifying: genetic mutations, birth defects, cancer, leukemia and disorders of the reproductive, immune, cardiovascular and endocrine systems.

While we have all heard of Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, the nuclear industry would have us believe these are but isolated events in an otherwise unblemished history. Not so. Over 800 other significant events have been officially reported to the International Atomic Energy Agency — Mayak, Tokaimura, Bohunice, Forsmark to name just a few.

The argument that nuclear energy is a necessary component of a carbon-free future is also false.

Greenpeace and the European Renewable Energy Council have put together a study called “Energy

[R]evolution,” which clearly shows that a clean energy pathway is cheaper, healthier and delivers faster results for the climate than any other option. This plan calls for the phase-out of existing reactors around the world and a moratorium on construction of new commercial nuclear reactors.

Furthermore, an energy scenario recently produced by the conservative International Energy Agency highlights the fact that nuclear power is not necessary for lowering greenhouse gas emissions. It shows that even if existing nuclear power capacity could be quadrupled by 2050, the proportion of energy that it provided would still be below 10 percent globally. This would reduce carbon dioxide emissions by less than 4 percent. The same amount of money, invested in clean, renewable energy sources such as wind and solar could have a much greater impact on lowering global warming.

Nuclear energy is an expensive and deadly distraction from the real solutions. “Fuel-free” sources of energy do not generate international conflicts (as I write I cannot help but think of Libya), they do not “run dry” and they do not spill. There are initial financial investments to be made, but in time the price of renewables will decline as technological advances and market competition drive the costs down. Furthermore, implemented wisely, a green, nuclear and fossil-free future will create a host of safe, new jobs.

As international organizations like Greenpeace join Japan’s Citizens Nuclear Information Center in an appeal to the Japanese government for improved evacuation plans and other protective measures for people still within the 30-kilometer exclusion zone; as the issue of food and water contamination continues to grow in Asia; as iodine tablets continue to sell out around the globe and people in places as far away from Japan as Los Angeles are on high alert for “radioactive plumes” — it is imperative that as citizens of the world we continue to voice our opposition to further investment in nuclear energy. We need a truly clean energy revolution now.

Kumi Naidoo is executive director of Greenpeace International.